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ABSTRACT

A study was made to determine the extent of age bias among counselors working with adult clients in educational settings. An Age Norms Inquiry questionnaire was sent to counselors in 55 urban colleges and to members of the Adult Development Guidance Association (186 of 381 questionnaires were returned). Age bias was operationally defined as preference for completion of selected developmental tasks at earlier age levels. While no uniform opinion with respect to age norms and constraints was shown, and more than half of the respondents showed some age bias (50%+ bias on 19 of 32 items and over 75% on 5 items), there were a sizeable number who were vigorously opposed to any suggestion of age norms and who would fight for counseling each individual case on its own merits. Women counselors were generally less age biased but no other counselor characteristics measured (age, counseling experience, or training) showed any significant correlation with age bias. The division of items into family, general, and vocational-educational categories also did not relate consistently to the bias found. (Two tables of response data and the questionnaire used are included.) (DM)

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HOW "AGE BIASED" ARE COLLEGE COUNSELORS?

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For many reasons, including industrial reorganization and reentry of middle-aged women into the labor market, the number of people between college age and old age who are looking for help with decisions about career change and higher education has increased startingly over the last few years. It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider the attitudes of college counselors toward such older clients. In particular, this study is focused on the extent of "age bias" among such counselors.

Age norms and the age-status system are deeply imbedded in middle-class America (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe, 1965). Most people agree that the best age to finish school and go to work is 20-22; that most men should be settled on a career by 24-26; and that most men hold their top jobs between 45-50. It is generally accepted that whatever the dimension of living, the older you are the less able you are to enjoy it or to participate in it. This applies equally to sex and love, to work and play.

Since counselors have shared the socialization of other middle-class Americans, it would not be surprising if they also have built-in assumptions about age-appropriate behavior. This becomes important when one considers that the decisions confronting many clients are related directly to what is expected of them, by themselves and by others, because of their age. Should they "make do" with an undesirable or unsatisfactory way of life because at their age they can't expect any better? If they try something new, like

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going back to college or branching off into a new career, will they "make a fool of themselves?" Even the covert attitude of a counselor can be coercive. In this case, what are the attitudes of the counselor? How likely is he to consider the competence and potentialities of each individual facing him, instead of proceeding on the basis of stereotypes about what a person of that age could or should do? How "age biased" is he?

Age Norms Inquiry

"Age bias" is measured here by responses to an Age Norms Inquiry, which is adapted primarily from questions used in the study of age norms and age status by Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe (1965). Changes are largely in the format (to multiple-choice), and in the addition of more educational-vocational items. The present form was arrived at after pretesting with a group of 50 counselors at a 1968 summer workshop on adult counseling.

Like the Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe items, the 32 included here fall into three categories: family items (6), educational and vocational items (15), and general items (11). For example, a family item is "What is the best age for a man to marry? a) 18-23, b) 24-30, c) 31-45." A vocational item is "When should most men be decided on a career? a) 16-21, b) 23-30, c) 31-45." A general item is "A woman can accomplish the most at a) 20-35, b) 35-50, c) 50-60."

"Age bias" is defined operationally as the choice of either of the two younger age ranges listed. For example, to question 19, "It is all right for a man to change his career at a)20-30, b) 30-45, c) 46-60," a respondent who indicates that either 20-30 or 30-45 is the appropriate age for career change is considered "age-biased." If he checks 46-60, if he leaves the question

unanswered, if he checks all three choices, or if he writes in that age is not relevant to career change, he is considered "unbiased."

Three items were eliminated from the scoring because they did not prove to be related to age bias. Therefore, the total possible "bias" score is 29--a respondent who scores "0" would be considered "unbiased."

Sampling

Since this is an exploratory study, a rough and ready sampling procedure was used. Age Norms Inquiries were sent to counselors on two mailing lists: 1) deans of students in 55 colleges and universities in the 10 largest cities of the United States, and 2) the members of the Adult Developmental Guidance Association.[3] The deans were asked to distribute 5 copies of the questionnaire to counselors at their schools. Many of these counselors are probably also members of the ADGA, and there is no way of knowing how many questionnaires actually were distributed by the deans. It would therefore be meaningless to estimate a refusal rate. Suffice it to say that out of 381 questionnaires mailed, 186 were returned. These 186 respondents may or may not be representative of college counselors as a whole. For this reason, the findings of this study should only be looked upon as suggestive, hopefully leading to new lines of inquiry.

As for those counselors who did respond (see Table 1), over half work in counseling centers in regular colleges and universities; the next largest

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Insert Table 1 about here

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group in community or junior colleges. There are more men than women, and many more over than under 35 years of age. Almost all have had at least one

year of experience counseling adults, most of them a good deal more, and most have had at least one course in guidance and counseling.

Findings

Since the chief question in this study concerns the degree to which college counselors would limit options for educational or vocational choice of older clients, the occurrence of a strong negative reaction on the part of many respondents to any implication of age constraints has been reassuring. Vigorous scrawls of "age doesn't matter," "no norms can or should be established," "It depends on the individual," or even "shame on you!" abounded throughout the margins or were expanded into angry letters. There were 23 respondents (12 percent of those returning the questionnaire) who refused altogether to attend to the individual questions but instead wrote a strong commentary on the concept of age-bias.

For this, the investigators were unprepared. It had been expected that some counselors would mark the oldest age, or leave items unanswered, or even add comments such as "age not relevant," but neither the degree nor the extent of repudiation found had been anticipated. Explanations were sent off hurriedly to those respondents who signed their protests, along with copies of a paper (Troll, 1968) verifying that the investigators too sided with the angels.

But not all the respondents were upset at the thought of age norms. The average "age bias" score for the entire group is 17 (out of 29). The distribution of "bias" by item is shown in Table 2. It can be seen that there are

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Insert Table 2 about here

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also 17 items on which more than half of the respondents checked one of the younger ages--were "age biased." It would seem, therefore, that adult clients have something like a 50-50 chance of finding a counselor who will judge them as individuals without regard to their age or who will be open to consider options for them that are usually limited to the young.

On the other hand, while this may be true in general, the picture for the older client is much more encouraging with regard to matters of career change. Here, normative proscriptions are much greater for the young adult than for later stages of development. Thus, only 17 percent of the college counselors in the sample would consider it inappropriate for a middle-aged executive to become a teacher, but 77 percent believe a young man should decide on a career by 30.

The only characteristic of the counselor that seems to have an important effect on "age bias" is sex.[4] Women counselors tend, on most items, to be clearly less age-proscriptive than men counselors. Not surprisingly, the greatest sex difference was on the item, "An attractive woman is . . ."

A minor, though curious finding is the effect of having had at least one course in counseling. This make for a significant difference in 5 items (Chi-square test). In four of these items, counselors who had a course showed <u>more</u> bias. They chose lower ages as appropriate for women to finish their education and for men to retire, and also for the time of greatest responsibilities. Where they were more lenient was with respect to a man's moving his family for the sake of his career.

Discussion

Three general conclusions can be drawn from these data:

1. While there is certainly no uniformity of opinion among counselors of adults with respect to age norms and age constraints, and more than half of those who responded showed some "age bias," there are a sizeable number who are vigorously opposed to any suggestions of age constraints and who would fight for considering each individual case on the particular circumstances of that case. Twelve percent of the respondents refused to check an appropriate age. It is not unlikely that many other counselors who received the questionnaire refused to have anything to do with it because they, like those who wrote letters, interpreted it as a document for age constraints. Thus what the writers would have hoped to be the case but did not believe they would really find to be true, that counselors working with adults would deviate from the general population groups studied by Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe, in the direction of greater freedom from age proscriptions, seems true.[5]

2. Women counselors are generally less "age-biased" than men. However, aside from sex, no other characteristic of the counselor measured shows any significant relationship with "age-bias," neither age, years of counseling experience, nor specialized courses or training in counseling, though there is a trend in the data toward specialized courses contributing to greater age bias.

3. On the whole, the a priori division of items into family, general, and vocational-education categories did not relate in any consistent way to the amount of bias found. If any statement might be made about kinds of

items, it would be that there is more age constraint for the period of inauguration of adulthood than for the later events of adult life.

There are some counselors who show no bias, others who show bias throughout, but most of the counselors show bias in some of the items some of the time. The point is, that though the results are encouraging--counselors seem to exhibit less "bias" than the average American--they are not altogether reassuring. Most counselors show some "bias." And every item in the inquiry evoked some "bias." Obviously, counselors of adults need to take a close look at themselves with regard to their own "age bias." The context of today's thrust in counselor education is self-confrontation. By focusing on one's own motives and needs, one can become freer in helping others.

References

Neugarten, Bernice L., Moore, Joan W., and Lowe, J. C. Age norms, age constraints, and adult socialization. American Journal of Sociology, 1965, 70, 710-717.

Troll, Lillian E. Age, sex, and social class variables in counseling adults. Unpublished paper read at Conference on Counseling Adults, Adult Developmental Guidance Association, Merrill-Palmer Institute, July 29-30, 1968.

Footnotes

1. Senior Research Associate.

2. Associate Professor of Guidance and Counseling.

3. The Adult Developmental Guidance Association (ADGA) grew out of several annual conferences on adult counseling sponsored by Wayne State University and the Merrill-Palmer Institute.

4. On a 3-way analysis of variance, neither age, sex, nor specialized education in counseling contributed to the total variance at better than 5 percent significance. Chi-square tests for each item, however, showed that the sex of the respondent made a significant difference in a majority of items (see the right-hand column of Table 2).

5. Studies are now in progress comparing the "age bias" of other groups with that of college counselors. For example, two groups of teachers given the inquiry appear to be more "age-biased" than this counseling group. On the other hand, graduate students taking a course in Psychology of Adulthood, are less "age-biased" than the counselors. These data will be presented at a later time.

Table 1

Characteristics of Counselors Who Responded to Inquiry

Characteristic		Number
Age		
	Under 35	45
	Over 35	118
	Total	163*
Sex		
	Male	100
	Female	63
	Total	163*
Work Setting		
	Four-year College or University	109
	Community or Junior College	34
	Adult Education Center (includes University Evening Extension)	14
	Department of Education	10
	Vocational Service	5
	Continuing Center for Women	4
	Other or Unspecified	10
	Total	186
Counseling Experience		
	1 year or less	8
	2 - 6 years	62
	7 - 15 years	38
	Over 15 years	52
	Total	160
Special Course in Counseling		
	Yes	103
	No	60
	Total	163

* Includes only those respondents who checked the information.

Table 2

Items Ordered by Percent of "Age Bias"*

Item Type	Item	% "Biased"	Women † Less "Biased"
Family	Best age for men to marry	83	
Family	Best age for women to marry	83	
Vocational	Men decide on career	77	
Vocational	Men finish education	75	X
Vocational	Women finish education	71	
General	Women accomplish most	70	X
Family	Men live with parents	64	
Family	Women live with parents	64	
General	Middle-aged woman	64	X
General	Middle-aged man	63	X
Vocational	Change from social worker to pilot	61	X
General	Young man	59	
General	Young woman	59	X
Vocational	Men retire	58	
General	Men accomplish most	58	X
Vocational	Men hold top job	55	X
Family	Women have another child	52	X
Vocational	Change from bus driver to sociologist	47	X
Vocational	Change from insurance to architecture	45	
Vocational	Change from teacher to lawyer	45	X
Vocational	Man run for public office	42	X
General	Attractive woman	42	X
General	Attractive man	37	X
General	Dance the "Funky Broadway"	32	
Vocational	Men change career	32	X
Vocational	Men return to college	26	X
Vocational	Women return to college	24	X
Vocational	Men move family for better job	23	X
Vocational	Change from executive to teacher	17	

* Respondent checked either of two younger age categories listed.

† X^2 significant at .05 level or better.

Appendix A

AGE NORMS INQUIRY* Troll-Schlossberg

Age: Over 35_____ Under 35_____

Have you had Professional Education in Adult Counseling or Development? Yes_____ No_____

Please state the number of years' experience you have had working with adults:_____

Sex: M_____ F_____

Agency you currently work for:_____

If you find it impossible to select any of the three choices for any item, it is permissible to leave that item unchecked or to write in a comment.

OTHER THINGS BEING EQUAL,

1. what is the best age for a man to marry?

   a) 18-23 b) 24-30 c) 31-45

2. what is the best age for a woman to marry?

   a) 18-23 b) 24-30 c) 31-45

3. what is the best age for a man to finish his education and go to work?

   a) 16-21 b) 22-30 c) 31-45

4. what is the best age for a woman to finish her education?

   a) 16-21 b) 22-30 c) 31-45

5. when should most men be decided on a career?

   a) 16-21 b) 22-30 c) 31-45

6. when should most men hold their top jobs?

   a) 30-40 b) 41-50 c) 51-65

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*Based on work of Neugarten, Bernice, Moore, Joan C., Lowe, J.C. "Age-Norms, Age Constraint and Adult Socialization," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 70, 1965, pp. 710-717.

7. when should most men be ready to retire?

a) 50-60 b) 60-70 c) 70-80

8. a young man is:

a) 18-22 b) 23-30 c) 31-35

9. a young woman is:

a) 18-22 b) 23-30 c) 31-35

10. a middle-aged man is:

a) 35-45 b) 46-55 c) 56-65

11. a middle-aged woman is:

a) 35-45 b) 46-55 c) 56-65

12. a man has the most responsibilities at:

a) 20-35 b) 35-50 c) 51-65

13. a woman has the most responsibilities at:

a) 20-35 b) 35-50 c) 51-65

14. a man can accomplish the most at:

a) 25-35 b) 35-50 c) 50-60

15. a woman can accomplish the most at:

a) 20-35 b) 35-50 c) 50-60

16. an attractive man is:

a) 15-25 b) 26-40 c) 41-65

17. an attractive woman is:

a) 15-25 b) 26-40 c) 41-65

18. it is all right for a woman to have another child at:

a) 30-35 b) 35-40 c) 40-45

19. it is all right for a man to change his career at:

a) 20-30 b) 30-45 c) 46-60

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20. it is all right for a man to return to college at:

a) 25-30 b) 30-45 c) 46-65

21. it is all right for a woman to return to college at:

a) 25-30 b) 30-45 c) 46-65

22. it is all right for an unmarried man to live with his parents rather than get his own apartment at:

a) 18-21 b) 22-28 c) 29-40

23. it is all right for an unmarried woman to live with her parents rather than get her own apartment at:

a) 18-21 b) 22-28 c) 29-40

24. it is all right to do the "Funky Broadway" (a dance) at:

a) 15-20 b) 20-30 c) 30-50

25. it is all right for a man to run for national public office at:

2) 25-35 b) 36-50 c) 50-70

26. at what age is it all right for a man to move his family to another part of the country to get ahead in his company?

a) 25-30 b) 30-40 c) 40-50

27. at what age can an insurance salesman consider architecture as a career?

a) 25-35 b) 35-45 c) 45-65

28. at what age can a corporation executive consider teaching as a career?

a) 25-35 b) 35-45 c) 45-65

29. at what age can a teacher consider law as a career?

a) 25-35 b) 35-45 c) 45-65

30. at what age can a bus driver consider becoming a sociologist?

a) 25-35 b) 35-45 c) 45-65

31. at what age can a social worker consider becoming a commercial pilot?

a) 25-35 b) 35-45 c) 45-65

32. it is all right for a woman to work when her youngest child is:

a) 0-5 b) 6-12 c) 13-18